

The Taste of Lent

(Cod meatballs and shrimp patties in tomato sauce)

By Mar Muñoz-Visoso

In thinking about Lent this year the first thing that came to mind was food. The *albóndigas de bacalao* (cod meatballs) and *potaje* (garbanzo soup) of my mother, and *tortas de camarón* (dry shrimp patties in tomato sauce) of my mother-in-law. It can be said that Lent and Holy Week have some special flavors in the Hispanic community. That is probably true of every people and culture.

It might seem strange to some that I talk about food in a time of fast and abstinence. Nonetheless, many of our cultural traditions, including the gastronomical, help us to remember values and customs of the liturgical seasons, precisely because they were born of them. They help us to get “in the mood.”

As with everything, however, Lent becomes a mere collection of rituals if not lived in its deepest meaning. For instance, judging by the numbers of us attending Ash Wednesday services, some people might think that for Hispanics this was the most important day in the liturgical calendar! But what is the point of receiving the ashes if later we do not make the effort to accompany the Master in his ascent to Jerusalem?

Lent reminds us that human existence is the story of an interpersonal relationship between man and God in the context of the new covenant sealed by Christ. This covenant makes possible a constant overcoming of sin in which conversion becomes our personal and communitarian attitude towards God and our brethren. This is the Christian vocation.

Conversion is a gift from God that requires a generous response and an internal purification effort on our part. The recurrent Lenten themes help us along the way: fast, abstinence, sacrifice, moderation of desires, prayer and works of mercy. The Sunday Gospels present us Jesus as protagonist, model and teacher. It is an itinerary that invites us to overcome selfishness and seek justice, and shows how the Christian community is both sign and instrument of reconciliation. It is, simply stated, an invitation to live more intensely our baptismal call, to lead a more conscious faith journey.

Saint Peter Chrysologus used to say, “Three are, brethren, the aids that allow for firm faith, constant devotion and permanent virtue. These three are prayer, fasting and mercy. For prayer calls, fasting intercedes, and mercy receives.” That is, prayer reinstates our communion

with God; charity reconciles us with our brothers and sisters; and, fasting, as an exercise of self control, frees us up spiritually and reconciles us with ourselves.

We often find excuses to avoid what makes us uncomfortable. “The world doesn’t come to an end,” we say, just because I eat meat on a Friday of Lent, or don’t give up something; or “I’ll find time for prayer later,” while the Internet, the TV or the iPod fill our lives with noise; or “let someone else worry, I got enough problems of my own.”

Meanwhile, we forget about whether the beggar we intentionally avoided made it through the night or the elder we didn’t visit died of loneliness; God never got his minute of attention; and, in this society of plenty, the body keeps packing up pounds it doesn’t need. God has become a distant voice in our hardened hearts, a remote echo in our conscience. And yet, we are mesmerized by our spiritual and physical ailments.

We need silence. We need times and spaces that allow us to listen to God. Maybe I will turn the radio off today on the drive home. By the way, Mom, send me the fish meatballs recipe. Mine don’t taste the same. It must be the cod.